The rational defensibility of being a traditional religious Jew

JOSHUA L. GOLDING

Religious Studies / Volume 35 / Issue 04 / December 1999, pp 391 - 423
DOI: null, Published online: 08 September 2000

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0034412599004977

How to cite this article:
JOSHUA L. GOLDING (1999). The rational defensibility of being a traditional religious Jew. Religious Studies, 35, pp 391-423

Rel. Stud. **35**, pp. 391–423 Printed in the United Kingdom

The rational defensibility of being a traditional religious Jew

JOSHUA L. GOLDING

Bellarmine College, Louisville, KY 40205

Abstract. The paper has two major parts. The first part articulates a working definition of what is a traditional religious Jew. This includes a discussion of whether it is necessary to have certain beliefs in order to be a religious Jew. Given the definition in the first part, the second part argues that it is *rationally defensible* for some persons to be traditional religious Jews. Included is a discussion of the notion of rational defensibility. The paper closes by discussing whether different religions can be rationally defensible for different persons.

I

(i) Historically, much debate has focused on whether it is rational to believe in traditional tenets such as 'God exists' and 'God has revealed Himself to human beings'.[1] Many writers have advanced cognitive arguments for, or against, these tenets. Meanwhile, others have stressed that the religious life involves the performance of certain *actions*, such as, ritual and good deeds. Some have claimed that a person may lead an active religious life, even whilst having serious doubts about religious tenets. Occasionally, some have advocated the pragmatic[2] argument that even if there is no rationale available to support belief in the traditional tenets, it is rational to be religious because of some great potential value in doing so.[3]

The present paper combines the cognitive and pragmatic approaches to the rational defensibility of religious commitment. Suppose we distinguish between 'believing in religious tenets' and 'being a religious person'. In addition to asking the more traditional question, whether it is rational to believe in religious tenets, it is now possible to ask whether it is rational to be a religious person. To address the latter, one must first articulate what beliefs *and* practices are necessary in order to qualify as a 'religious person'.

[1] This paper is based on my earlier work, 'On the rationality of being religious', in Radcliffe and White (eds) *Faith in Theory and Practice*: *Essays on Justifying Religious Belief* (Chicago IL: Open Court, 1993), 91–101; and 'Toward a pragmatic justification of religious faith', in *Faith and Philosophy* **7** (1990), 486–503. Part of my argument is inspired by Pascal's Wager, which is discussed critically in 'Pascal's Wager' in *The Modern Schoolman*, **71** (1994), 115–143. Salient differences between the argument here and Pascal's Wager are noted below in footnotes 34–36.

[2] On the distinction between 'cognitive' and 'pragmatic' arguments, see Nicholas Rescher *Pascal's Wager: A Study of Practical Reasoning in Theology* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1985), 46ff.

[3] In the Jewish context, see Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*, 18 (New York NY: Simon and Schuster, 1981). For one discussion of the centrality of belief in traditional Judaism, see J. David Bleich's General Introduction to *With Perfect Faith: The Foundations of Jewish Belief* (New York NY: Ktav, 1983).

One can then investigate whether it is rational to have those beliefs and carry out those practices. In this paper, such a rationale will combine cognitive and pragmatic strategies.

However, the course charted so far may be overly ambitious. Clearly, the articulation of the 'religious person' would require a rather loose definition. Furthermore, generally speaking, people are not simply 'religious', rather, they are religious Jews, or Christians, or Muslims or whatever. Thus, even if one could show that it is rational to be a 'religious person', this would leave open whether any particular religious way of life is rationally defensible. So, instead of considering whether it is rational to be a religious person, here we shall consider whether it is rational to be a religious person of a particular sort, namely, a traditional religious Jew.[4]

First, a brief overview of the paper. Part I proposes a definition of the 'traditional religious Jew'. Towards the end, I argue that from the traditional perspective, it is better for the religious Jew to have a *confident* belief both that God exists and that God has given the Torah to the Jewish people. However, I also argue that it is not necessary that one have such confident beliefs. What is necessary is that a person believes there is (at least) a *live possibility*[5] that these tenets are true. It is also necessary that one engages in a certain way of life, namely, that which is prescribed by the Torah. This view represents a compromise position between those writers who stress the primacy of religious belief, and those who stress the primacy of religious action. Part I closes with a brief discussion of the notion of rational defensibility.

Part II argues for the thesis that it is rationally defensible for some persons to be religious Jews in the sense defined in Part I. By the phrase 'some persons', I mean to include many individuals who are knowledgeable about the standard critiques of traditional religious tenets. My argument will hinge partly on the claim that even if these critiques have some merit, they are not compelling enough to invalidate the belief that there is a *live possibility* that those tenets are true. The paper continues with a pragmatic approach, namely, that so long as one believes there is (at least) a live possibility that the traditional tenets are true, the potential value of being a religious Jew far outweighs the potential loss.[6]

The reader is invited to consider the discussion of the rationality of being a religious Jew as a 'test model' for the strategy pursued in this paper. For, that same strategy could be utilized to construct an argument for being a

[4] Needless to say, there are 'religious Jews' who would not identify themselves as 'traditional'. However, the focus of this paper is the rationality of being a *traditional* religious Jew. For the sake of brevity, I occasionally use the phrase 'religious Jew' as a shorthand for the more cumbersome 'traditional religious Jew'. This should not be taken to imply that the only kinds of religious Jews are traditional ones.

[5] More on the notions of *confident belief* and *live possibility* in sections I.vi and II.i.

[6] One issue not addressed in this paper is the question of why (or whether) is it important to seek a rationale for belief and/or practice of Judaism (or any religion.) For the purpose of this paper, I simply *assume* that there is some point in attempting to work out a rationale for being a traditional religious Jew.

'religious person' in some generic sense, or for being a religious person of some other particular sort. For example, a Christian might adapt this strategy by articulating the conditions for being a 'traditional religious Christian', and then arguing that it is rationally defensible to fulfill those conditions. The question of whether it is *more* rationally defensible to be a religious Jew or a religious Christian would then turn on which of the two arguments succeeds better in its details.

Alternatively, perhaps different religious ways of life may be rationally defensible for different persons. At first blush, such a position seems problematic. A general way of stating the problem is by asking whether we can make coherent sense of 'religious pluralism', understood as the thesis that different religions, which make (some) conflicting claims and involve (some) conflicting practices can be rationally defensible for different persons. The paper concludes by showing that the approach adopted herein provides the basis for a coherent account of religious pluralism.

(ii) There are many ways one might propose to articulate the notion of a 'traditional religious Jew'. At minimum, any such proposal should be well grounded in those texts which are widely acknowledged to be the classic Jewish sources, namely, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Rabbinic literature (i.e., the Talmud and Midrashic compilations). Of course, what counts as a 'well grounded' proposal may be a matter of debate. Without insisting that the proposal offered below is the only legitimate one, I submit that it is well grounded.

Roughly stated, a traditional religious Jew[7] is a person who pursues the goal of attaining or maintaining a certain kind of good relationship with a certain kind of God in a certain kind of way.[8] More specifically, such a person is a traditional religious Jew only if he has traditional Jewish conceptions of three key notions, namely: God, the good relationship with God, and the way in which he or she pursues that relationship. A 'traditional Jewish conception' is some idea or theory that is well grounded in the traditional sources. The ensuing three sections of this paper offer a sketch of the traditional Jewish conceptions of the aforementioned notions.

First, some preliminary remarks. The notion of 'pursuing a goal' requires comment. Some philosophers are willing to use this locution in a context where it is fully acknowledged (even by the pursuer of the goal himself) that

[7] Judaism is a social or communal religion. Ideally, it would be best to start by defining the 'traditional religious Jewish community' and then ask whether it is rational for a group of persons to be members of that community. However, this brings up thorny issues about the rationality of group behaviour which I wish to sidestep in this paper.

[8] One might be tempted to define the traditional religious Jew simply as 'someone who observes the commandments of the Torah'. But, how many commandments does a person have to keep in order to count as 'observant'? What if one keeps only the ethical laws and none of the rituals? Which rituals, if any, are necessary in order to count? What if one keeps the commandments (even the rituals) merely as a social habit without any conviction whatsoever? The notion of a 'Torah-observant Jew' itself needs to be unpacked.

the attainment or maintenance of the goal is impossible, and that the goal is, to borrow Kantian terminology, a 'regulative ideal' which will never be attained.[9] For example, in this sense, an athlete might be said to 'pursue the goal' of running a mile in one minute. In this case, the athlete might acknowledge that he does not really intend to bring about this goal; rather, he acts *as if* he were intending to do so. However, as used in this paper, the phrase 'to pursue a goal' is to make an intentional or conscious effort to help bring it about that some state of affairs – the state of affairs described by the goal itself – is attained or maintained. The traditional religious Jew does *not* view the goal of having a good relationship with God as a regulative ideal; he views it as a potential or actual state of affairs which he seeks to attain or maintain in 'real time'.

Another clarification: obviously, different persons can pursue the same goal with a different degree of zeal. Furthermore, one can pursue the same goal with different degrees of zeal at different times in one's life. We may say that a Jew is 'more' (or 'less') traditionally religious to the extent that he pursues (or fails to pursue) the good relationship with God. We may say that a 'very' religious Jew considers all other goals in life to be subordinate to this goal. To qualify as a traditional religious Jew, one need not be 'very' religious. Rather, one is religious to the extent that one pursues the stated goal.

Our definition is broad enough to include at least three types of religious Jews. Category 1 includes those who regard themselves as not having any good relationship with God, and who consider themselves as seeking to *attain* that relationship in the first place. Category 2 includes those who regard themselves as having already attained a good relationship with God, and who regard themselves as seeking to *maintain* (and possibly to improve) that relationship. Finally, category 3 includes those who consider themselves to fall somewhere between categories 1 and 2. This category includes those who consider themselves to have only *partially* succeeded in attaining a good relationship with God. Such persons are engaged in the quest to advance the process of attaining a good relationship with God. Furthermore, within this third category, some Jews may have a confident belief they have partially succeeded in attaining a good relationship with God. Others may have only a weak or unconfident belief that they have a good relationship with God. Of course, it is possible for someone to fluctuate from one category to the other. We shall return to these distinctions later.

Drawing freely on the Jewish sources and on classic works of philosophical theology, the following three sections sketch the Jewish conceptions of God, the good relationship with God, and the way in which the religious Jew pursues that relationship. There is no pretence here that the sketch below is

[9] See Nicholas Rescher *Ethical Idealism: An Inquiry into the Nature and Function of Ideals* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1987).

complete. Much room is left open for explicating important details of those conceptions. Insofar as the sources are open to different interpretation on many points, there may be a number of legitimate *variations* on the Jewish conceptions of the aforementioned notions. Perhaps this may be regarded not as a weakness but as a strength of the present proposal on how to understand what it means to be a traditional religious Jew.

(iii) We begin with the Jewish conception of God. Based on the sources, a convenient formulation is that God is conceived as the Supreme Person of the universe.[10] The term Supreme connotes that God is not merely better than any other possible being, but also that God is *qualitatively superior* to any other possible being. Differently stated, God is not merely 'a lot better' than every other possible being; rather, God is better *in kind* than every other possible being. Even if the goodness in all things or beings (other than God) were somehow to be combined, their goodness would not equal or even approach that of God.

Now, what constitutes God's supreme goodness or qualitative superiority? Clearly, one thrust of the tradition is that God's supremacy concerns certain metaphysical traits traditionally ascribed to God. These include, that God is uncreated, independent, and eternal.[11] Generally, it has been taken to be the case that these traits radically distinguish God from everything else, and so it makes sense to think that God's supremacy or qualitative superiority involves these metaphysical traits.

But God is conceived not just as supreme, but as the Supreme *Person*. The term 'Person'[12] connotes that God is a rational free agent, that is, capable of intelligent and wilful action. So, the notion that God is the Supreme Person means that God's intelligence and freedom are *qualitatively superior* to the intelligence and freedom of all other beings. Perhaps this dovetails well with the notion described above that God's supremacy concerns the 'metaphysical traits'. For, if God is uncreated, independent, and eternal, then God's intelligence and freedom are bound to be radically superior to those of created, dependent, mortal beings. In any case, what constitutes divine supremacy concerns not only God's metaphysical attributes, but also something distinctive about God's rational free agency.

[10] The phrase 'Supreme Person' is not a literal translation of any single phrase that occurs in Scripture. However, it is based on such phrases as *Yehido Shel Olam* (the Unique One of The Universe) and *Ribbono Shel Olam* (Master of the Universe). See Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah, 19.1; *Babylonian Talmud: Berakhot*, 9b. Scriptural sources for the notion that God is supreme include the account of creation in Genesis, Isaiah 40.18–26, and Jeremiah 10.12–16. On the notion of God as a person see below note 12.

[11] See, e.g., R. Moses Maimonides *Code of Law*: *Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah* 1.1–3; R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto *Way of God* 1.1.

[12] Scripture teaches that the human person is created in the image or 'form' of God (Genesis 1.27); this implies that there is some fundamental kinship between God and the human person. Furthermore, Scripture uses the term *ish* (man, person) to refer to God in at least one instance (Exodus, 15.3). In this paper I use the term 'person' as shorthand for 'capable of intelligent and wilful action'. Scripture and Rabbinic literature abound with references to God as intelligent and wilful.

Finally, the sources teach that God's Supreme Personhood is expressed in the way God characteristically *acts*. In other words, God has certain character traits; for example, benevolence, compassion, holiness, and righteousness. Let us reserve the term 'Personhood' to refer to God's rational free agency, and the term 'Personality' to refer to God's character traits. Now, just as God's Personhood is conceived as qualitatively superior, God's Personality is also conceived as qualitatively superior. For example, God is not merely 'more benevolent' than anything else, rather, God's benevolence is qualitatively superior to that of anything else. Precisely what these traits amount to, and in what way God has these traits in a qualitatively superior way, is a matter of interpretation which we need not enter here.

It is the task of Jewish philosophical theology to work out this conception in greater detail. For the purpose of this paper, the present sketch of God as the Supreme Person will suffice.

(iv) Next, we must articulate the Jewish conception of the good relationship with God. This is conceived as a certain kind of 'interpersonal' relationship with God.[13] The sources teach that this relationship with God can blossom fully only in the context of a *community* of religious Jews.[14] Thus, the term 'interpersonal' should not be taken to denote a *private* relationship between God and each individual Jew, but rather a *communal* relationship between God and the community of Jews. Hence, we must first articulate that communal relationship. We can then turn to the role of the individual within that context.

The major components of this relationship are 'mutual recognition' and 'mutual love' between the community and God.[15] Let us first discuss the community's recognition and love of God. Recognition of God means not only having a cognitive awareness or knowledge of God's existence, but also a certain attitudinal or emotional response to God, namely, a fear of and reverence for God. This involves a fear of the possibility of God's punishment if one violates God's will, but also a more elevated sort of attitude, namely, a reverence or respect for God, just for what God is – the Supreme Person. Reverence for God inspires a willingness to obey God's will, independently of the fear of God's punishment.[16]

[13] In describing this relationship, Scripture and Rabbinic literature invoke the relationship between father and son (Exodus 4.22); king and servant (Ezekiel 20.33); husband and wife (Hosea, 2.18).

[14] The notion that God seeks a communal relationship with the Jewish people is found in, e.g., Exodus 19.6; 25.8; 29.46.

[15] God's recognition and love for the Jewish people, as well as the commandment to recognize God, are described in Deuteronomy 4.32–40 and 7.6–9. For the commandment to love God, see Deut. 6.4. On the concepts of recognition, love, and reverence for God, see, Maimonides *Code of Jewish Law: Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah*, 1.6 and II.1; cf. Moshe Chaim Luzzato *Path of the Just*, Introduction. There are different interpretations of what the Torah means when it says Jews should 'know God'. One interpretation is that Jews should know that God exists by way of rational proofs (see *The Guide to the Perplexed*, III. 54). Another is that Jews should know God spiritually or experientially.

[16] On the various types of reverence and love, see the anonymous *perush* [commentary] on Maimonides' *Code of Jewish Law: Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah*, II.1. For a more complex discussion, cf. R. Shneur Zalman *Tanya*, chs 41–44.

Similarly, love of God also involves two aspects – a love of God for what God provides, and a more elevated sort of love of God just for what God is, the Supreme Person. To love God is not only to appreciate and acknowledge the goodness of God, but also to obey and worship God. Moreover, the love of God involves the effort to be spiritually intimate with God. Scripture (Deuteronomy 10.20) refers to this as 'cleaving' or 'bonding' (*devekut*) with God. This is the apex of the religious community's good relationship with God. To bond with God is to establish some deep connection with the very Personhood or Personality of God.

So far we have discussed the community's recognition and love of God. How does God express recognition and love for the Jewish community? Obviously, God knows that the community exists! And, given their status as non-equals, there is no place for God to 'fear' the human.[17] But there is a sense in which God may 'recognize' or show respect to the community of religious Jews, and that is by giving them a special responsibility or 'mission'. The sources teach that God expresses that special responsibility by giving the community the Torah or 'Teaching', which includes the commandments (*mitzvot*).

God expresses love for the religious community through the providence of material and spiritual blessings, either in this life and/or the next world.[18] Material blessing includes physical health and wellbeing, flourishing and prosperity. Spiritual blessing includes God's revelation and communication to the community. Thus, the revelation of the Torah is an expression not only of God's recognition, but also of God's love. Furthermore, spiritual blessing includes God's assisting the community to attain certain spiritual virtues or good qualities, such as, holiness and righteousness.

However, the greatest expression of God's love occurs when God is spiritually intimate with that community. Scripture refers to this as the 'indwelling of the divine presence' amidst the Jewish people (Exodus 29.45). This is the divine response to the Jewish attempt to bond with God. We may understand this relationship on analogy with an intimate relationship between two human beings. In a relationship of mutual recognition and love, two persons may 'bond' with each other so closely, such that the values and aspirations, joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations, etc., of the one person are in some way sympathetically experienced by the other person. Such a relationship is a partnership, in which the two partners share or participate in the personhood and/or personality of the other person. This partnership does not obliterate the distinction between the personhood of the two partners.

[17] Thus we never find in Scripture or Rabbinic literature the notion that God has reverence (*yirah*) for human beings. However, we do find that God expresses dignity or honour (*kavod*) for some human persons. See e.g. 1 Samuel 2.30 and Mishna Avot 4.1.

[18] The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 11.1) affirms the doctrine that there is a next world, which is often understood to mean a realm of souls without bodies. However, the overwhelming majority of the Jewish sources focus on the project of attaining and maintaining a relationship of bonding (*devekut*) with God in *this* world.

Similarly, the community 'bonds' with God, and God 'dwells within' that community, when God's projects and plans are shared and endorsed by the community, and when God's Supreme Personhood or Personality is expressed or exhibited through the community.

Two points of clarification are necessary. The sources teach that while it is in some sense *always* true that God recognizes, loves, and dwells within the community of Jews, it is not always the case that this recognition, love, and 'indwelling' is fully expressed or actualized. The notion of 'exile' is precisely that God's presence is in some way missing from the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the sources emphasize that no matter how bad that relationship has become, the community has the opportunity to re-establish a good relationship with God.[19] The goal of the religious community is to attain a fully expressed or actualized relationship of mutual recognition, love, and bonding between God and the Jewish community.

Secondly, the Jewish conception should not be construed to mean that non-Jews cannot have some sort of good relationship with God. On the contrary, God recognizes all humans by giving them basic moral responsibilities, and by expecting that they fulfill them.[20] Furthermore, God manifests some form of love for all humans, indeed all creatures, by sustaining their existence, and allowing them to grow and flourish.[21] However, what is distinctive about the relationship between God and the Jewish people is that it involves the above described communal bond (*devekut*), which is brought about through an especially intense form of recognition and love. The only way for non-Jews to be a part of this communal project is to join the Jewish people through conversion.[22]

So much for an account of the good relationship between God and the Jewish community. Within this context, what is the goal of the individual religious Jew? Basically, the individual also seeks to recognize, fear, revere, love, worship and establish a bond with God. But one does not pursue an exclusively private relationship between oneself and God. Similarly, God seeks to recognize, love, and 'dwell within' each individual religious Jew, insofar as he or she is a member of the religious community. From the Jewish perspective, it is simply impossible for a solitary individual Jew, no matter how religious, to recognize, love and bond with God in the way that the religious community as a whole might do so. To the extent that the individual Jew participates in the divine–communal project of expressing the Personhood or Personality of God, it may be said that God 'dwells within' that individual Jew.

[19] See Deuteronomy 30; Maimonides *Code of Jewish Law: Laws of Repentance*.

[20] See *Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin* 56b ff; Moses Maimonides *Code of Jewish Law: Laws of Kings*, 9.

[21] The notion that God is the source of all beneficence (*hesed*) and goodness (*tov*) to all creatures is implicit in the creation story and in many other passages such as Psalms 104 and 145. The notion that God loves righteousness and justice is found in Psalms 33.5; that God loves the righteous, in Psalms 146.8.

[22] Arguably, the Jewish sources teach that even the relationship between God and the Jewish people cannot be finally consummated or perfected except in the context of God's relationship with humanity at large. See e.g. Zachariah 14.

Two further points must be added regarding the kind of value at stake in this relationship with God. Some philosophers distinguish between 'subjective' and 'objective' value. A state or condition has subjective value if it involves or causes pleasure or joy for a given person. For example, having a relaxing massage, or even having a blissful spiritual experience has *subjective* value. On the other hand, a state has *objective* value if it involves or causes the wellbeing or flourishing of that person, not *qua* pleasure seeker, but *qua* human being. Now, the Jewish sources affirm that the good relationship with God is *both* subjectively and objectively valuable, both for the Jewish community, and for the individuals in that community. In other words, having that relationship with God not only involves or causes pleasure or joy; it also involves or causes the wellbeing or flourishing of the human being.[23]

Secondly, inasmuch as God is conceived as supreme, so too the relationship of bonding (*devekut*) with God is conceived by the Jewish sources as having supreme worth or value for the religious person. For, in that relationship, the religious person (as a member of the religious community) shares or participates in God's Supreme Personality and/or Personhood.[24] Thus the good relationship with God is conceived not merely as 'a lot better' or 'vastly better' than any other goal, but as *qualitatively superior* to any other goal. Differently stated, the religious goal is conceived as better not in quantity but *in kind* than any other conceivable good a human might have: no quantitative amount of other goods (i.e., goods that a human might have independently of a good relationship with God) added together would equal the value of that relationship for that human.

This concludes our sketch of the Jewish conception of the good relationship with God. For a fuller account one needs to consult the Scriptural, Talmudic, Midrashic, theological, philosophical and spiritual literature of Judaism. It is not the aim here to work out that notion in full detail, but only to articulate a conception which suffices for the purpose of this paper.

(v) Our next task is to describe the Jewish conception of the way to attain and maintain the good relationship with God. Stated simply, the way to pursue that goal is to follow or 'observe' the Torah. Note that the Jewish conception of the way is integrally linked with its conception of the religious *end*. For, the good relationship involves God's recognition and love of the Jewish community, which is expressed partially in that God has revealed to them the Torah. But the sources also teach that the Torah itself is God's prescription for how the Jewish people, throughout their generations, should pursue that relationship.

Let us elaborate briefly on the traditional conception of the Torah or 'Teaching'. Rabbinic literature teaches that God has communicated not

[23] That the relationship with God is a source of pleasure or joy is suggested in Isaiah 58.14; that the relationship is a source of goodness or wellbeing is found in Psalms 34.

[24] The notion of sharing in God's supreme nature is discussed by R. Moshe Chaim Luzzato in *Way of God*, 1.2.

only the 'written Torah', which is contained in the Hebrew Scriptures, but also the 'oral Torah', which is expressed in the Rabbinic literature. Included in the written and oral Torah is a system of divinely ordained law, that is, a set of societal norms which God has commanded upon the Jewish people, especially through Moses, but also through the interpretations and enactments of other prophets and sages. The written portion of the law is contained in the Pentateuch; the oral law is expressed in the Rabbinic literature. Both the written and oral Torah include historical accounts, homiletic materials, parables, ethical instructions, psalms, prayers, words of wisdom, etc. Thus, a religious Jew conceives of 'following the Torah' not only in the narrow sense of obeying Pentateuchal and Rabbinic law, but also in the broad sense of living in accord with the values and ideals of the entire 'Teaching'.

The notion that God revealed the Torah has raised many questions about the nature of this revelation and its expression in sacred literature. Such questions include: does the notion that God revealed the Torah to Moses mean that God dictated certain specific words which the prophet Moses heard and then wrote down? Or can it mean that God 'inspired' Moses in a certain way, such that Moses 'heard' and then wrote down words which resulted from his own imagination? Do the Jewish sources teach that each and every word of the Pentateuch was dictated to Moses? Even if every word was originally dictated to Moses, is it also taught by the Talmud that the present text of the Pentateuch is exactly identical with Moses' text? Are all the claims and doctrines which are taught in the Pentateuch, the Scriptures, and the Talmud to be taken as literally true? Or, are some claims to be understood metaphorically? Furthermore, despite the traditional notion that God intends the Torah to be applicable to the Jewish people throughout their generations, is there room for development, evolution, or adaptation of the law over time?

These are only some of the questions raised by the traditional conception of the Torah. We shall have occasion to return to some of these questions later (II.iii). However, at present it is not necessary to provide answers to such questions. Insofar as the traditional Jewish sources are open to different responses, there may be a number of possible *variations* on the traditional Jewish conception of the Torah. Minimally, on the present proposal, for a conception of the 'way' to count as traditionally Jewish, it must involve the notion that the relationship of bonding (*devekut*) between the Jewish people and God is advanced by following the Torah. A complete theory of what constitutes 'following the Torah' is beyond the scope of this paper.

This completes our sketch of the traditional Jewish conceptions of God, the good relationship with God, and the way that relationship is to be pursued. Finally, it must be underscored that a traditional religious Jew not only has these 'conceptions'. What is crucial is that he *acts* on those conceptions, that is, he pursues the good relationship with God by following the Torah.

(vi) We are now in a position to ask what *beliefs* a person must have in order to be a traditional religious Jew. In other words, to what beliefs is a religious Jew *committed*? First, we must briefly discuss the notions of 'belief' and 'commitment to a belief'.

A full explication of the notion of belief is beyond the scope of this paper. Let us stipulate that a belief involves both a psychological and a pragmatic component. Firstly, to believe that *p* is to have a psychological or subjective conviction that *p* is true. Precisely what is the nature of this conviction is beyond our scope. Here we take for granted that humans have the ability not only to have convictions, but to have convictions with different levels of confidence, ranging from weak, to moderate, to very strong, to maximum or 'total conviction'. Secondly, a belief is not merely a matter of one's inner psychological state. A person who believes that *p* is disposed to take *p* into account when deciding how to act; he is disposed to consider the implications which *p* might (or might not) have on his behaviour, and to guide his actions accordingly. Surely, this brief account of belief needs refinement, but it suffices for the present purpose.

Next, a brief clarification is necessary of what is meant by a 'commitment' to a belief. A person is committed to a belief *B* if that person engages in some practice *P* which it is rational to engage in only if it is rational to have belief *B*. Note that if a person is committed to *B*, that does *not* entail that he has belief *B*, nor (if he has belief *B*) that this belief is a rationally defensible one. However, if it so happens that he lacks belief *B* or that his belief *B* is not rationally defensible, that would provide a basis for saying that it is not rational for him to engage in practice *P*.

Let us return to the issue at hand. To what beliefs is a religious Jew committed? The answer is complicated by the distinction (above, I.ii) between three categories of religious Jews. Let us focus initially on category 1, namely, those who do not regard themselves as having a good relationship with God, but who consider themselves as seeking to *attain* that relationship.

Based on earlier discussion, a religious Jew who pursues the attainment of the good relationship with God would consider a cognitive awareness or knowledge of God as part of the religious goal. Let us assume that whatever one knows, one very confidently believes. It follows that such a Jew must regard the attainment of a *very confident belief* that God exists as part of the religious goal.

This does *not* imply that the religious Jew must *already* know or very confidently believe that God exists, whilst he is in the process of pursuing the goal. In fact, he might be rather dubious about God's existence. It is quite an ordinary phenomenon that people pursue goals whilst being rather uncertain that conditions are such that they will succeed. So, a person who pursues the attainment of a relationship with God is not thereby committed to having even a moderately confident belief that God exists.

Nevertheless, the question may be pressed, is it necessary for the religious

Jew to have *some* belief that God exists, in order to engage in this pursuit? In pursuing this goal he makes a conscious effort to bring about a certain state of affairs, namely, that he attains a certain relationship with God. Obviously, this state of affairs can be realized only if God exists. It follows that such a person is rationally committed to the belief *that there is* (*at least*) *a live possibility* that God exists. This claim requires clarification and defense.

Like any other belief, a belief that there is a live possibility that *p*, involves both a *psychological* and a *pragmatic* component. The psychological component may be stated negatively: to believe there is a live possibility that *p* is *not* to be in the position of being totally convinced or maximally confident that not-*p* is true (or that *p* is false). Thus, a person who is totally convinced that God does not exist is a person who does *not* believe there is a live possibility that God exists. The pragmatic component may be stated positively: to believe there is a live possibility that *p* is to be disposed *at least under some hypothetical circumstances* to take *p* into account when deciding how to act. (Of course, a person who believes that *p* is more than just a live possibility will be disposed to take *p* into account under *more* circumstances than a person who believes *p* is only a live possibility.)

Having made this clarification, the claim made above may be defended as follows. Plainly, a religious Jew who pursues the attainment of a good relationship with God realizes that he can attain this relationship only if God exists. Now, firstly, it would seem nonsensical, if not psychologically impossible, to pursue this goal if one were psychologically convinced that God does not exist. For, to do so would be to attempt to bring about that which one believes one cannot bring about, no matter what one does. Secondly, it would be irrational to pursue this goal and at the same time never be disposed, under any circumstances whatsoever, to take into account the practical implications of the proposition, 'God exists'. Put simply, a person who is disposed never to take into account the implications of 'God exists' on his behaviour is either a highly confused and irrational religious Jew, or is not a religious Jew at all. Thus, a religious Jew who pursues a good relationship with God is committed to having the belief that there is a live possibility that God exists.

Furthermore, the religious Jew is also rationally committed to believe there is (at least) a live possibility that 'God has given the Torah to the Jewish people, and the Torah applies to all Jews throughout their generations'. For, as we have already stated, that relationship is conceived in such a way that the keeping of the Torah – God's revealed teaching – is an integral part of that relationship. Moreover, the Torah is conceived as the means by which the religious Jew is supposed to attain that relationship. Hence, firstly, it would not make sense to be a traditional religious Jew if one is psychologically convinced either that God did not give the Torah, or that the Torah no longer applies to currently existing Jews. Secondly, it would not make

sense to be a religious Jew if one is never disposed under any hypothetical circumstances to guide one's actions based on the proposition that 'God has given the Torah'.

Let us next consider category 2, namely, those Jews who regard themselves as pursuing the goal of *maintaining* a relationship with God. To what beliefs is such a Jew committed? Based on the framework sketched above, such a Jew must not only *believe* that God exists; he must also believe that he *knows* or is *cognitively aware* of God's existence. And, if he considers himself to know that God exists, it follows that he must have a very confident belief that God exists. Moreover, based on earlier discussion, such a person considers himself to know that he has a relationship with God which is to be maintained (and perhaps improved) by keeping the Torah. It follows that such a person must consider himself to know, and therefore also to have a very confident belief, that God has given the Torah to the Jewish people throughout their generations.

Next, let us consider category 3, namely, those Jews who consider themselves to have *partially* succeeded in attaining a good relationship with God. Such Jews need not consider them selves to *know* that God exists. Like those in category 1, such Jews may regard knowledge of God as part of the good relationship which they do not consider themselves to have attained. However, must these Jews have a confident belief that God exists? This depends on the status of their belief that they have partly succeeded in attaining a good relationship with God. If a person confidently believes that he has partially attained some relationship with God, then presumably he is committed to having a confident belief that God exists. On the other hand, a person might have only a weak or unconfident belief that he has attained a good relationship with God; in which case, he may have only a weak or unconfident belief that God exists. (A variation on this is that a person might have a weak belief that God exists, and a confident belief that *if* God exists, he has partially attained a good relationship with God. Of course, in this case, any such 'partially attained good relationship' could not include knowledge of God.) Hence, some Jews in category 3 are committed to a confident belief that God exists, and some Jews in that category are not.

Furthermore, those Jews who have a rather confident belief that they have partially succeeded in attaining the good relationship with God, are committed to a rather confident belief that God has given the Torah to the Jewish people, and that it applies to Jews throughout their generations. However, like Jews in category 1, all Jews in this category 3 must believe there is (at least) a live possibility that God has given the Torah to the Jewish people, and that the Torah applies to Jews throughout their generations.

Our discussion has illustrated some complexities involved in determining to what beliefs a traditional religious Jew is rationally committed. The bottom line is that *all* traditional religious Jews are committed to having a

belief that there is (at least) a live possibility both that God exists and that 'God has given the Torah to the Jewish people throughout their generations'. Finally, note that if a person is rationally committed to some belief, he is also committed to any belief which is a logical consequence thereof. It follows that the religious Jew is rationally committed to having a belief in the live possibility of any propositions which are logical consequences of the aforementioned two propositions. Precisely what those consequences are will depend on the details of one's theory of God and one's understanding of the Torah.

(vii) Let us conclude Part I by summarizing our working definition. A person is a 'traditional religious Jew' if and only if he meets all of these conditions:

(1a) He conceives of God as the Supreme Person.
(1b) He believes that there is (at least) a live possibility that such a God exists.
(2a) He conceives of the good relationship with God as one in which he is (or would be) a member of a communal relationship of mutual recognition, love and bonding (*devekut*) between God and the Jewish people.
(2b) He conceives of that relationship as having supreme worth or value.
(3a) He conceives of the Torah as the way God has given for the Jewish people to attain or maintain such a relationship with God.
(3b) He believes that there is (at least) a live possibility that God has given the Torah to the Jewish people, and that it applies to Jews throughout their generations.
(4) He pursues the attainment or maintenance of that relationship with God by keeping the Torah.

Based on earlier discussion, this list represents only the minimum qualifications for being a traditional religious Jew. For a Jew who believes merely in the live possibility of God's existence has not completely attained a good relationship with God. From the traditional perspective, it would be better for the religious Jew to have a *confident* belief both that God exists and that God has given the Torah. According to the analysis above, this is not because having this confident belief *per se* makes him a religiously better Jew, but rather because having a good relationship of mutual recognition and love with God *presupposes* having such a confident belief. In any case, in order to show that it is rationally defensible to be the sort of religious Jew who considers himself to have attained the good relationship with God, one must show that it is rationally defensible to have those confident beliefs. Such a project may be worthwhile, but it falls outside the scope of this paper.

The fact remains that any person who fulfils conditions 1–4 is a traditional

religious Jew. So, if it is rationally defensible for a person to fulfil these conditions, it is rationally defensible to be a traditional religious Jew. Part II will argue that it is rationally defensible for some persons to fulfil all of these conditions.

Before proceeding, my use of the term 'rationally defensible' requires explanation. To say that a position (or a claim, or a way of life) is 'rationally defensible' is different from saying that it is 'rationally compelling'. A position is 'rationally compelling' if it can be shown that *any* rational being ought to adopt that position. A position is 'rationally defensible' if an argument can be marshaled to support that claim or position, and if criticisms and objections to that argument can be rebutted. However, that argument might not be compelling upon all rational beings. For example, it might rest on certain assumptions which are intuitively plausible to some persons but not others. Alternatively, the argument might rest on an appeal to certain experiences which not everyone has had. Now a position is *not* rationally defensible if the denial or opposite of that position can be shown to be rationally compelling. However, it is possible that two opposing positions could be rationally defensible for different people. We shall return to this point in the conclusion of this paper.

II

(i) Part I of this paper articulated a working definition of the traditional religious Jew in terms of four conditions. We shall now consider the rational defensibility of fulfilling each of those conditions.

We begin with condition 1a. The religious Jew conceives of God as the Supreme Person. Under what circumstances is it rationally defensible to have such a conception? To have a conception of something is to regard that something as a 'theoretical possibility'. (This is weaker than the notion of a 'live possibility', to which we shall return later.) There are two criteria by which we may judge whether it is rational for some person to regard some conception as a theoretical possibility. The first is whether the given concept is internally or logically coherent. The second criterion is whether the concept is externally coherent, that is, whether the concept *coheres with other related concepts held by the same person*. Let us consider how these criteria may be applied in the present case.

Firstly, it would be irrational to have some conception of God if it contains an internal logical contradiction. Now surely, the notion of God as a Supreme Person does not suffer from an *obvious* internal contradiction, as does, for example, the notion of a 'round square'. It might be argued that the notion of God as a Supreme Person suffers from some hidden or 'deep' contradiction. Arguments have been made against the coherence of the notion of an 'infinitely perfect being' or a 'maximally perfect reality'. It has also been claimed that the notion of a person is incompatible with the notion of

perfection.[25] Without passing judgment on such arguments, we may simply note that the notion of a Supreme Person described above need not be construed as a 'Perfect Person'. To say that God is radically superior *in kind* is not necessarily to say that God is perfect. In any case, until and unless it can be shown otherwise, it is rationally defensible to regard the conception of God as the Supreme Person as logically coherent.

A second way in which a person can fail to hold a conception rationally is if that person also holds some *other* related conception which logically conflicts with the first conception. For example, it could be that one's conception of God as the Supreme Person might logically conflict with one's conception of good and evil. Suppose for instance that one maintains *both* the notion of God as the Supreme Person and a sort of Parmenidean conception of that which is 'truly good' as utterly permanent and unchanging. Arguably, such an individual fails to hold his or her conception of God rationally. For, if it is true that to be a person requires that one is capable of change, then it would seem that one could not consistently regard God as 'truly good' in the Parmenidean sense.

There is no guarantee that a given individual's conception of God is externally coherent, for this depends on the details of his conception of God and on his other related conceptions. However, the relevant point is that there is no reason to assume that a given individual's conception of God as the Supreme Person will *necessarily* conflict with his related conceptions. It is the task of Jewish philosophical theology to work out the details of the Jewish conception of God in such a way that it coheres with one's other conceptions. Jewish philosophers have sometimes made things difficult for themselves by adopting metaphysical and ethical conceptions from non-Jewish sources. It seems fair to say that the more well developed these notions are without contradiction or inconsistency, the more rationally defensible it is for a person to have these conceptions. Nevertheless, until and unless it is shown that the Jewish conception of God conflicts with other related conceptions held by a given person, it is rationally defensible for him to have that conception. So much for condition 1a.

Let us move on to condition 1b. The religious Jew believes there is (at least) a live possibility that such a God exists. Condition 1b is stronger than condition 1a; for one may regard something as a theoretical possibility without regarding its existence as a live possibility. For example, a scientist might regard the notion of extraterrestrial life as internally and externally coherent, but still be totally convinced that no such life exists. This might be because the scientist thinks that there is simply no evidence for such life, or it might be simply because the scientist has a gut feeling that such life does not exist.

[25] For a discussion of such arguments, see e.g. William Wainwright *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1988), 6–10.

Under what circumstances is it rationally defensible for someone to believe there is at least a *live possibility* that some proposition *p* is true? As stipulated earlier, to believe there is a live possibility that *p* is to *not* be totally convinced that *p* is false, and to be disposed, at least under some hypothetical circumstances, to take *p* into account when deciding how to act. I suggest the following twofold criterion. If:

(1) it is rationally defensible to believe there is (at least) some small evidence that *p* is true, and,
(2) it is rationally defensible to believe there is no conclusive proof that *p* is false,

then, it is rationally defensible to believe that there is (at least) a live possibility that *p* is true. Stated simply, as long as I have some reason to think *p* is true, and no definitive proof that *p* is false, then it is rationally defensible for me to believe there is a live possibility that *p*.

Based on this twofold criterion, many will agree that it is rationally defensible to believe there is (at least) a live possibility that God exists. Firstly, even many an atheist would admit that it is rationally defensible to believe there is some evidence for God's existence. That evidence includes the Jewish tradition as well as other traditions which purport that God, the Supreme Person, has revealed Himself to human beings.[26] Note well: I am not here defending the claim that the reports of putative revelation provide *compelling* reason for the belief that God exists. The claim here is the very minimal one that such reports constitute at least some small evidence for God's existence. Hence, the first criterion above is met.

Secondly, let us consider a person who is well aware of the standard critiques (based on Hume, Freud, etc.) against the belief in God's existence. Despite such critiques, very few philosophers claim that there is *definitive proof* that God does not exist. In fact, there are many atheists who would concede that there is no such definitive proof. Hence the second criterion is also met. In sum, it is rationally defensible for many persons to believe there is a live possibility that God exists.

(ii) We move next to condition 2. Condition 2a states that the person has a traditional Jewish conception of what constitutes a good relationship with God. Again, it is rationally defensible for a person to have some conception if it is internally and externally coherent. Until and unless it is shown that the Jewish conception of the relationship with God is internally and externally incoherent for a given person, it is rationally defensible for him to have that conception.

[26] The argument summarized here will be familiar to some readers as a version of the argument from religious experience (see, e.g., Wainwright *Philosophy of Religion*, ch. 5). There are, of course, many other ways of trying to rationally substantiate the belief in God. These include the traditional arguments, viz., the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments. If any of these arguments work, that would only strengthen the claim that there is some reason to believe in God's existence.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider all possible objections to the Jewish conception of the good relationship with God. It is the task of Jewish philosophical theology to work out a coherent account of the details of that relationship. In what follows I shall describe and respond to two common objections to that conception.

The first objection concerns the Jewish claim that the good relationship with God is inherently *communal*. As noted earlier, the sources teach that the good relationship can take place only between God and the community of religious persons. But, given that God is conceived as Supreme, both in power and benevolence, why can't God relate just as well with *individual* persons on an individual basis? Assuming there is some answer to this question, another objection concerns the Jewish teaching of chosenness. After all, the Jewish sources teach that God is not only the God of the Jews but the God of all creation and all peoples. Why wouldn't the Supreme Person seek to establish the same good relationship with all peoples?

A full-scale response to these objections exceeds the scope of this paper. What I propose to show is that these objections do not succeed in identifying *incoherencies* within the Jewish conception of the good relationship with God.

In response to the first objection, the Jewish sources do *not* insist that all solitary relationships between individuals and God are worthless. Rather, they insist that specifically the relationship of bonding (*devekut*) with God requires a community of like-minded religious individuals. Earlier it was suggested that the community bonds with God when God's projects and plans are fully shared and endorsed by the community, and when God's Supreme Personhood or Personality is expressed or exhibited through the community. Much like any other grand human achievement, the attainment of that special relationship with God is not something that an individual can do on his own. It is quite plausible to conceive of this project as inherently communal.

The second objection above concerns the teaching of chosenness. In response, it is first necessary to keep in mind that this teaching is in a sense mitigated by another Jewish tenet, namely, that converts are accepted into the Jewish people. The doctrine of chosenness is *not* that God exclusively chose one race for the purpose of establishing a certain relationship.[27] Nevertheless, conversion to Judaism involves not just the adoption of a religion, but also joining the Jewish people. Thus it remains that the Jewish sources teach that God especially chose one special people or nation. Is it plausible that God might have done this?

To this question there are various possible responses. One response is that God chose to establish the good relationship with the Jewish people as an intermediate step towards (eventually) establishing that same relationship

[27] In a sense, Abraham was the first convert. See R. Judah's opinion in *Palestinian Talmud*: *Bikurim* 1.4.

with all peoples. Another response is that while God chose to relate to the Jewish people in a certain distinctive way, God also wishes to relate well with other peoples, albeit in different ways. The notion that God wishes to relate well with all humans is implicit in the teaching that God issued a minimum universal code of behaviour for all humans. Furthermore, perhaps it is part of the divine scheme that the world be populated by a variety of peoples with a diversity of dispositions and talents; each people has some divine purpose or mission which it is supposed to accomplish. Within this multicultural context, it is conceivable that God chose the Jewish people to play a pivotal role in bringing about some good relationship between God and all peoples. That pivotal role involves attaining the intimate relationship of bonding (*devekut*) with God. To enable them to play that role, God has given the Jewish people the Torah, which includes, but also surpasses, the basic universal code which God expects all humans to follow. While not everyone may find this scenario intellectually appealing, it is not patently incoherent. For those persons who find such an account plausible, it is rationally coherent to accept the teaching of chosenness.[28]

So much for condition 2a. We move on to condition 2b, which states that the religious Jew conceives of the good relationship with God as having supreme worth or value. This condition involves a 'value judgment'. Is it rational to make this judgment? In general, can our value judgments be rationally defended or criticized? Some philosophers claim that value judgments cannot be rationally defended or critiqued. If so, at least with respect to condition 2b, there is nothing rational – nor, for that matter, irrational – about being a religious Jew. If value judgments are beyond the pale of reason, then, with respect to his value judgments, the religious Jew is no more – but also no less – rational than anyone else.

My own position is that value judgments can be rationally defended or criticized. However this is not the place to defend this position. For the present purpose, I propose to offer something more limited. Namely, I shall argue that given the assumptions (defended above) that the Jewish conceptions of God and the good relationship with God are rationally defensible, it is also rationally defensible to regard such a relationship with God as supremely valuable.

Recall that the attainment of the good relationship with God would involve both material and spiritual blessing upon the Jewish people. Material blessing includes material wellbeing, health, wealth, good fortune. Spiritual blessing includes such qualities as holiness, fulfillment, etc., whether in this world and/or the next. Finally, the apex of the good relationship is an

[28] For further discussion of a rationale for chosenness, see my paper 'Jewish identity and the teaching of chosenness' in Charles Selengut (ed.) *Jewish Identity and the Postmodern Age* (St Paul MN: Paragon House, 1999), 91–108.

interpersonal bonding (*devekut*) between the Jew and God, both on a social and individual level.

Now, is it rational to judge such material and spiritual blessings to be valuable? It seems eminently rational to regard one's own material wellbeing as a rather important concern in life. What about spiritual blessing? Assuming (as we are) that the notion of God and the good relationship with God is coherent, it is reasonable to regard one's spiritual welfare, both in this world and possibly the next world, as a matter of important concern. Indeed, it would not be implausible to regard one's spiritual welfare as potentially of *greater* concern than one's material welfare.

However, the crucial question is whether it is rationally defensible to regard a relationship of interpersonal bonding (*devekut*) between oneself and God as a matter of supreme worth or value. Assuming (as we are) that this relationship is coherently conceived, the answer is clearly affirmative. The religious Jew conceives of that relationship as one in which he shares or participates in God's Supreme Personhood and/or Personality. If this is coherent, it is also coherent for the religious Jew to think that the *quality* or worth of such a relationship is determined by the *quality* of the other Person involved in that relationship, namely, God.

An analogy with human interrelationships may be helpful. Suppose Jacob has a relationship of mutual recognition, love, and bonding with Rachel. Suppose Rachel is a wonderfully wise, brilliant, creative, generous, compassionate, fair, honest, and courageous person. If Jacob is engaged in such a relationship with Rachel, then Jacob in some sense participates in Rachel's personality and/or personhood. After all, in a truly interpersonal relationship, one person bonds with another person precisely insofar as that other individual is a *person* (and not merely insofar as that other person is, say, a physical creature of the same species). Differently stated, an 'interpersonal' relationship is one in which the personhood (free rational agency) and personality (moral and spiritual character) of those persons in the relationship are expressed or exhibited. Thus it is plausible to think that the quality or worth of such a relationship is determined by the quality or worth of the persons involved in that relationship. If so, it is rationally defensible to think that an interpersonal relationship with the Supreme Person would be supremely worthwhile for the community of persons having that relationship.

I do not insist that this line of argument is rationally compelling upon all humans. Some readers might respond that they find other things in life to be more valuable than relationships with other persons, be they ordinary humans or be it the Supreme Person. Alternatively, one might be dubious about the claim that the worth of an interpersonal relationship of mutual love and respect is determined by the worth or value of the persons involved in that relationship. What I have argued is that if the Jewish conceptions of God and the good relationship with God are coherent, it is rationally defensible to conceive of such a relationship as supremely valuable.

(iii) We proceed to condition 3. Condition 3a states that the religious Jew conceives of the Torah as the way God has given for the Jewish people to attain the good relationship with God. Again, it is rationally defensible for a person to have this conception if it is internally and externally coherent. As with any conception, its external coherence will depend on what other related notions a person has. Here we shall focus on internal coherence of the traditional conception of the Torah.

It was argued above that it is coherent to conceive of God as the Supreme Person, and of the good relationship with God as an interpersonal bond (*devekut*). As noted earlier, the Jewish conception of that interpersonal bond (*devekut*) is integrally linked with its conception of Torah. Until and unless it can be shown otherwise, it is coherent to conceive of the Torah as the divinely prescribed way to attain that relationship.

Historically, the Jewish conception of Torah has been attacked in different ways. Despite these challenges, it is plausible to maintain that it has never been shown that this conception is incoherent. It is impossible here to mention and respond to all such challenges. Here we shall consider and respond to three standard objections.

The first objection claims there are apparent inconsistencies within the text of the Hebrew Scriptures. Certain passages seem to contradict others.[29] If indeed the text of the Torah is inconsistent, how could it be coherent to suppose that the Torah constitutes the way to a good relationship with God?

In response, recall that the Torah includes not only the Hebrew Scriptures, but also the oral Torah, which includes Rabbinic exegesis. One task of exegesis is to resolve apparent inconsistencies in the Scriptures. A general point about texts is relevant here. For any text which contains apparent inconsistencies, it is always possible that there is some resolution to be theorized. Rabbi Moses Maimonides went so far as to claim that the prophets *knowingly* introduced inconsistencies into the Scriptural text for various pedagogical reasons.[30] Hence, the fact that there are apparent inconsistencies in the plain meaning of Scripture does not imply that God did not reveal the Torah. Nor does this render incoherent the notion that the way to attain a certain relationship with God is by following the Torah.

A second objection focuses on the Torah as a system of law. Is it coherent to think that God would have deemed it necessary to legislate a divine law, in order to establish a good relationship with the religious community? Why could God not have simply recommended, or perhaps commanded, those actions which promote the good relationship with God, *without* legislating a body of religious law?

In response, the Jewish sources insist that man is not only a social animal, but a legal animal as well. The religious character of the Jewish community is not sufficiently defined merely by its customs and rites. What binds the

[29] For example, Genesis seems to contain different versions of the Creation story.
[30] See *The Guide to the Perplexed*, Introduction to the First Part.

community together and propels it towards a certain relationship with God is the *code of law* by which that community lives. Indeed, any community is held together by some system of rules and regulations; the most fundamental of which is, arguably, its legal code. For it is ultimately the law which defines what behaviour is acceptable or unacceptable in a given society, partly by defining what sanctions will be employed to enforce those rules and regulations. Hence the plausibility of a religious law.

A third objection is based on the assumption that all human beings have some natural capacity to know what is morally right or wrong. We know, for example, that justice, compassion and benevolence are good; injustice, cruelty, and greed are bad. Why, then, is it not sufficient that religious persons establish a good relationship with God simply by living a morally good life? What sense can be made of the many rituals in the Torah, such as, animal sacrifices? Is it coherent to think that such practices will lead to a good relationship with God? Furthermore, the Torah prescribes a number of things which seem not only peculiar, but downright unjust. For example, certain punishments for certain transgressions seem unusually harsh. For instance, the punishment for committing adultery or having homosexual relations is death. Another troublesome issue, especially for many moderns, concerns the role of women in the Torah. For example, it seems the Torah provides women with less rights and privileges than men, at least in certain respects. Is it coherent to suppose that a Supreme Being would have prescribed a way of life which conflicts with our sense of justice?

In response, three strategies have been used to counter such objections. These are the *apologetist*, the *pietist*, and the *developmentalist* strategies.

The *apologetist* strategy is to articulate some rationale to 'explain away' those rituals and laws which seem peculiar or unjust. For example, one might argue that bringing animal sacrifices reinforces the notion that God expects a high level of devotion; or that it allows the religious Jew to experience an intimacy with God by partaking in a meal at which God is symbolically present. Similarly, one might theorize that God intended the relationship between husband and wife as a model for the relationship which God aims to establish with the Jewish people. From this perspective, it is not unreasonable to view adultery and homosexuality as a profound violation of the divine intention. It is also not unreasonable that the husband has certain privileges (and also certain responsibilities) which the wife lacks. Of course, this conception of the roles of husband and wife may conflict with certain modern ideas about those roles. But this would show only that the Torah is *externally* incoherent with certain conceptions of those roles which are foreign to the Torah.

Alternatively, the *pietist* strategy, runs as follows. Perhaps it is true that human beings have some innate capacity to know that certain actions are morally right or wrong. But it is not necessarily true that humans instinc-

tively know *everything* about how humans ought to live, especially concerning how to establish an interpersonal relationship with God. It is quite plausible that, for the sake of attaining this relationship, God might have commanded certain actions which we would never know without revelation, the reasons for which we do not fully understand. Arguably, the presumption that humans should be capable of thoroughly understanding God's commands is not only mistaken but hubristic as well.

Furthermore, the pietist strategy insists it is not surprising if Torah prescribes some things which seem unjust. It is rationally defensible to suppose that our own sense of what is just is not perfect, and that God may very well know better than we what is just or unjust. Thus, suppose it *does* seem unjust to us that the punishment for adultery or homosexuality is death, or that God should have arranged matters such that women have less privileges than men. The pietist response is that it is still coherent to think that there could be some divine purpose at work here which we fail to understand because of our limited abilities. The fact that we do not comprehend *everything* in the Torah does not imply that it is incoherent to think that the Torah is the way to a good relationship with God.

Thirdly, the *developmentalist* strategy, runs as follows. Earlier we mentioned the question of to what extent the application of the Torah may evolve over time. In truth, within the Talmud itself certain portions of Scriptural law are circumvented and in some cases done away with completely. Clearly, Jewish law *does* undergo development. For example, the Talmud teaches that the actual circumstances under which the death penalty could be carried out are extremely rare.[31] It is also the case that although Scripture permits a man to have more than one wife, this practice was banned by the Rabbis during a later period. How could the Rabbis do this? According to the Talmud, God empowered the Rabbis and sages of each age to interpret, and if necessary, adapt the Torah so that its basic principles are applied. The Talmud makes clear that if necessary, the Rabbis have the power to 'uproot' certain things from the Torah, and to impose certain injunctions to defend or secure the Torah.[32] They have the power to do this if they find that in some circumstances, certain aspects of the law come into conflict with certain other aspects of the law. When and whether this is appropriate is a question of judgment that must be decided by the community of Torah scholars. On such questions, there is of course room for debate among Torah scholars; there is also a mechanism in place for settling such debates.

[31] On efforts to restrict the death penalty, see *Babylonian Talmud*: *Makkot* 7a. One Rabbinic view stated there implies that the death penalty should never be carried out. See also Maimonides *Code of Jewish Law: Laws of the Sanhedrin* 12.1–2.

[32] For example, the Talmud suggests a way to circumvent the Scriptural law that all monetary debts held by private citizens are cancelled during the Sabbatical year; see *Babylonian Talmud*: *Gittin*, 34a. Another example of a Rabbinic institution is the marriage contract or *ketuba*, which is basically intended to protect the rights of the bride.

Using this approach, one might argue that while certain punishments for certain transgressions may have been appropriate at some time in the past, they are no longer appropriate now. Similarly, one might argue that while a subservient role for women may have been appropriate in earlier times, it is no longer appropriate now. One might even try to make the case that women should be given the exact same privileges and rights as men; the latter is a matter of debate among current Jewish writers. It is not our business here to settle such debates. The point here is that there exists a mechanism in Torah law by which the Rabbis can adapt its application to changing circumstances, if there are good reasons, based on the Torah itself, for doing so. A law which is deemed to conflict with some other law, or with principles of equity and justice, can be restricted, emended, or even uprooted. Since this mechanism is built in to the Torah, any such incoherence can, in theory, be resolved.

We have discussed several strategies of response to objections against the coherence of the traditional conception of the Torah. No doubt these objections could be discussed further, and other objections could be raised as well. The claim here is that no compelling objection has ever been offered which *shows* that this conception is internally incoherent. If so, it is rationally defensible to fulfill condition 3a.

We move next to condition 3b. To be a religious Jew, a person must believe that there is (at least) a *live possibility* that 'God has given the Torah'. Based on earlier discussion, if it is rationally defensible to believe that:

(1) there is (at least) some small evidence for this proposition, and that
(2) there is no conclusive disproof of this proposition,

then, it is rationally defensible to believe that there is (at least) a live possibility that this proposition is true. I submit that, for many persons, this twofold criterion is indeed met.

Firstly, it is rationally defensible for many persons to believe there is at least *some* evidence for this proposition. That evidence is the ongoing existence of the Jewish tradition itself. Jews have possessed and practised the Torah for centuries, and have claimed, on the basis of tradition, that the Torah was divinely revealed during a collective religious experience at Mount Sinai. In addition, some Jews have claimed to have religious experience of attaining or partially attaining the good relationship with God, precisely through keeping the Torah. This provides *some* evidence for the proposition at issue.

Secondly, despite the standard critiques against this proposition, it is notoriously difficult to *disprove* conclusively that God has revealed the Torah to the Jewish people. For example, it is sometimes thought that this proposition has been disproved by modern science, which (it is claimed) is

inconsistent with the account of creation and miracles in Scripture. It is also sometimes thought that this proposition is inconsistent with modern Biblical criticism, which claims to find historical errors and anachronisms in the Pentateuch, apparently indicating that the Pentateuch is not a divinely revealed text, but rather a human document that evolved over many centuries. Finally, it is sometimes claimed that the rise of Christianity provides counterevidence to the Jewish doctrine that the Torah remains applicable to Jews in later generations. However, even if all these arguments had merit, none of them show *conclusively* that the Torah was not divinely revealed or is no longer applicable to Jews.

Briefly, there are several ways in which the traditionalist might respond to the above arguments. With regard to modern science, one might reconcile the claims of modern science with those of Scripture by suggesting that science itself has not *proved* that creation and miracles do not occur; rather, science *assumes* that creation and miracles do not occur. Alternatively, one might suggest that the Scriptural account of creation and miracles may be read metaphorically rather than literally. If so, there need not be any inconsistency between science and Scripture.

With regard to modern Biblical criticism, analogues of the three defensive strategies described above in connection with an earlier objection are available to the traditionalist. The *apologetist* strategy is to consider each bit of Biblical criticism and try to show that each apparent historical inaccuracy or anachronism is only an apparent one; that the philological, archeological, and anthropological analysis upon which Biblical criticism is based is flawed or question-begging; that a careful reading of the Pentateuch shows that it does represent an integral whole which bespeaks a single author, etc. Whether this strategy works or not will depend on the details of such arguments. In this paper, it is impossible to evaluate whether this defensive strategy works.

Alternatively, the *pietist* strategy insists that God could have miraculously revealed things to Moses that were ahead of Moses' time, and that God may have inscrutable reasons for making the Pentateuch *look like* a human document, by intentionally inserting apparent historical flaws and anachronisms. No doubt some religious persons will find this approach appealing, and some will not.

Thirdly, the *developmentalist* strategy would affirm that God did reveal the Torah to Moses, but concede that the Pentateuch has been edited by human hands during the course of its transcription, especially in ancient times.[33] During this period of transcription, perhaps certain anachronisms and historical inaccuracies may have crept into the text. One may even go so far as

[33] For a recent exposition of this view, see David Halivni Weiss *Revelation Restored* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1997). Weiss claims to find ample support for this view, *within* the Scripture and Rabbinic literature itself.

to admit that there were different versions of the same original text, and that the present text evolved or developed over time. Nevertheless, in spite of any such flaws, the Pentateuch as we know it represents that text which the Jewish community, under the leadership of its scholars and sages, accepted as canonical or binding at some pivotal point in their past. Obviously, whether or not there is good evidence for this developmentalist view of the Pentateuch is an issue we cannot settle here. The relevant point is that the assumption that there are flaws and anachronisms in the current text of the Pentateuch does not conclusively refute the traditional claim based on religious experience that both the written and oral Torah contain the record of divine revelation.

Finally, despite the advent and popular success of Christianity, it has never been conclusively proven that the Torah is no longer applicable to succeeding generations of Jews. Granted, there are many Christians who claim to have experience of a God which has in some sense annulled the obligation of the Jewish people to keep the Torah. (Of course, there are many devout Christians who do not make this claim.) We need not pass judgment here on whether this constitutes good evidence against the claim that the Torah represents God's prescriptions for Jews of all generations. The relevant point is that it does not constitute *conclusive disproof*. Hence, the second criterion above is also met. In sum, it is rationally defensible to believe there is (at least) a *live possibility* that God has given the Torah to the Jewish people, and that it applies to Jews throughout their generations.

(iv) Finally, we come to condition 4. To be a traditional religious Jew, one must actively pursue the attainment or maintenance of a good relationship with God by keeping the Torah. To ask whether it is rationally defensible to fulfill this condition is to ask whether it is rational for a person to engage in a certain course of action. Under what conditions is it rationally defensible for a person to engage in some course of action?

One way in which a course of action may be rationally defensible is on the basis of an assessment about the potential or expected values that are at stake in a given decision problem. Decision theorists have formalized this procedure by articulating what is known as the Expected Value Principle.[34] The intuitive idea underlying this principle is that it makes sense to take into account both the likelihood that a given option will yield a certain outcome, as well as the value of that outcome if it in fact occurs. For each available option, one must take into account all possible outcomes, their values, and the likelihood that those outcomes will in fact occur if one chooses that option. One must also take into account the potential losses of choosing any available option. In this way one obtains an 'expected value' for each

[34] On this principle, see Richard Jeffries *The Logic of Decision Making* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Unlike the present argument, Pascal's Wager applies this approach to the decision about whether or not to *believe* God exists.

available option. One then compares the 'expected value' of all available options. According to the Expected Value Principle, the option with the highest expected value is the rational choice.

For those readers unfamiliar with it, the formal version of the principle is best understood by way of example. Suppose I am faced with the following gambling options:

Option A: Gamble $1.00 on Horse A.
Option B: Gamble $1.00 on Horse B.

Suppose I believe that horse A has a 1/2 chance of winning a payoff of $2.00 (i.e., my original dollar returned, plus $1.00); on the other hand, horse A has a 1/2 chance of losing, that is, incurring a loss of my original $1.00. Further, suppose I believe horse B has a 1/3 chance of winning at a payoff of $6.00 (i.e, my original dollar returned, plus $5.00); also, horse B has a 2/3 chance of incurring the loss of my original $1.00.

Given these options, the principle works as follows. For each option, one multiplies the chance of a successful outcome by the value of that outcome; one also multiplies the chance of an unsuccessful outcome by the value of that outcome. The two results are then added together. In this case, the expected value of option A is computed as follows:

$$(1/2 \times \$1.00) + (1/2 \times -\$1.00) = 0.$$

For option B, the expected value would be:

$$(1/3 \times \$5.00) + (2/3 \times -\$1.00) = \$1.00$$

Thus, Option B turns out to have the *higher* expected value. So, according to the Expected Value Principle, the rational choice is option B. Note that according to this principle, an option which has a possible outcome that is extremely valuable may turn out to be rational even if the likelihood that that outcome will occur is extremely low. For example, on the basis of this principle, a gamble on a long-shot horse will turn out to be rational if the payoff on that horse is high enough relative to other gambles (and relative to not gambling at all).

The same strategy of reasoning may be applied to less mundane cases, even where it may be difficult to assign specific numerical measurements for probability and value assignments. For example, suppose a suitor is courting a woman whom he considers beautiful, noble, and uniquely gifted. Even if he thinks his chance of success is low, the Expected Value Principle will yield that it is rational for the suitor to exert great effort to win the woman's hand – so long as he deems the value of success to be high enough, relative to the other goals attainable on his other available options. In general, the *more* value he attaches to winning her hand, the *less* likely must he deem the chances for success, in order for it to be rational for him to make the effort

to do so. And, if he deems this potential goal to be overwhelmingly valuable, then it will be rational for him pursue that goal, even if he thinks there is only a very small chance of success.

The case of the suitor may be represented by formulating the following options A and B:

Option A: Make every effort to pursue the woman.
Option B: Do not make every effort to pursue the woman.

Suppose the suitor believes that even on Option A he has only a 1/10 chance of success, and a 9/10 chance of failure. If the value of success is represented by some very high number W and the value of failure is zero, then the expected value of option A is:

$$(1/10 \times W) - (9/10 \times 0) = W/10.$$

On the other hand, suppose the suitor believes Option B has 1/1 chance of resulting in some moderate value V, but no chance of resulting in the very high value W. So the expected value of option B is:

$$1/1 \times V = V.$$

In this situation, the expected value of Option A will be higher than that of Option B so long as $W/10 > V$. In other words, the expected value of Option A will be higher than that of Option B so long as the suitor deems the value of successfully winning the hand of the woman to be *more than ten times the value* V. Now in real life, it might be difficult for the suitor to determine whether W is worth precisely ten times more than V. It also might be difficult to determine or even guess the probability of success or failure on Option A. So, if the suitor thinks that W is just 'a lot better' than V, then he might not be able to make a rational decision based on the Expected Value Principle. But if he thinks that W vastly overwhelms or dwarfs V, and that the probability that he will attain W on Option A is higher than it is on Option B, then the Expected Value of Option A will be higher than that of Option B.

An important caveat about expected-value assessments must be noted. An action may have a high expected value for a certain person, given the beliefs and value assignments of that person. That does not in itself imply that the action is rationally defensible, unless the beliefs and value assignments upon which that assessment is based are also rationally defensible. For example, suppose the suitor in the case described above is deluding himself into thinking that he has any chance whatsoever of successfully winning the woman's hand. Alternatively, suppose the suitor has an exaggerated and faulty conception of how valuable it would be to win the hand of this particular woman. If so, an expected-value assessment might yield the result that given his beliefs and value assignments, the action of pursuing the

woman has a higher expected value, even though, all things considered, this is *not* a rationally defensible course of action. An expected value assessment shows that it is rationally defensible to do some action only if the beliefs and value assignments upon which that assessment is made are also rationally defensible.

Now let us return to the decision problem at issue in this paper. In what follows, I shall argue on the basis of the Expected Value Principle that for some persons, it is more rationally defensible to keep the Torah than not to do so.

As argued above, it is rationally defensible for some persons to fulfill conditions 1–3. Such a person believes there is (at least) a live possibility that God exists, that God has given the Torah to the Jewish people, and that the Torah remains applicable to Jews throughout their generations. As argued above, it is rationally defensible to believe there is (at least) some (small) evidence for these propositions. Furthermore, such a person conceives of the good relationship (*devekut*) with God as *qualitatively superior* to any other goal. Finally, he conceives of the Torah as the divinely prescribed way to attain that relationship. This leads to the conclusion that it is rationally defensible for such a person to believe that the expected value of keeping the Torah is higher than that of not doing so.

Stated bluntly, the person who fulfills conditions 1–3 is analogous to the suitor in the case described above. He may think the evidence that God exists and that God has given the Torah is minimal. He may even regard other religious paths (such as Christianity or Islam) as live possibilities. However, as long as he considers the value of attaining the good relationship with God to be qualitatively superior to any competing goals, the option which he believes has the highest chance of attaining that end will turn out to have a higher expected value than any other option. Thus, an expected value assessment indicates that it is more rationally defensible for him to keep the Torah than not to do so.

More technically stated, the case of the person who fulfills conditions 1–3 and who faces the choice of whether or not to keep the Torah may be represented by formulating the following options:

Option A: Keep the Torah.
Option B: Do not keep the Torah.

For argument's sake, assume the person believes that if he chooses Option A, the probability that he will attain the good relationship with God is *very low*. Perhaps this is because he finds the standard critiques of traditional Jewish tenets to be very persuasive; so he is very dubious about God's existence or about the divine authenticity of the Torah. Let us say he considers the probability on Option A that he will attain the good relationship with God to be 1/100. Let G be the value of attaining the good relationship with God.

For argument's sake, suppose he believes that if he fails to attain G, then his choice of Option A will result in *no value whatsoever*. Given these parameters, the expected value of Option A is:

$$(1/100 \times G) + (99/100 \times 0) = G/100.$$

On the other hand, suppose he believes that on Option B there is a definite or 1/1 probability that he will attain some goal that has value V. We may imagine V to be very large; yet, by hypothesis, G is qualitatively superior to V. As stated above, such a person regards the probability that he will attain the good relationship with God to be *lower* if he chooses option B rather than Option A. But suppose this person believes there is some small probability that some religious way of life *other than* keeping the Torah can result in his attaining G.[35] Say he considers the probability that he will attain G on Option B to be 1/200. In this case, the expected value of Option B is:

$$1/1 \times V + 1/200 \times G, \text{ or, } V + G/200.$$

Given these results, it follows that Option A will have a higher expected value than Option B if and only if:

$$G/100 > V + G/200.$$

Solving for G, this means that Option A will have the higher expected value if and only if:

$$G > 200 \times V.$$

Now, by hypothesis, G is *qualitatively superior* to V, and so G is indeed more valuable than $200 \times V$. Indeed, no matter what value V is multiplied by, G will always be more valuable. The result is that the expected value of Option A is higher than that of Option B. Furthermore, we can now see that the specific probability assignments used above are immaterial to this outcome. As long as the person conceives of G as qualitatively superior to V, and as long as he believes the most probable way of attaining G is by choosing Option A, then, Option A will have a higher expected value than Option B. Moreover, the more probable one believes it to be the case that God exists and that God has given the Torah, the *higher* will be the expected value of keeping the Torah.[36]

[35] It has been argued that Pascal arbitrarily assumes that the only possible way of attaining the infinite good is if the Christian God exists and one believes in the Christian God. The present argument *allows* for the live possibility that religious paths other than the Torah may be ways to attain the relationship of bonding with God, but insists that, given the Jewish conception of bonding (*devekut*) with God, it is *more plausible* that one will attain that relationship by keeping the Torah than by some other religious way.

[36] Against Pascal's Wager, it has been argued if there is even a slim chance of attaining the infinite good by *not* believing in the Christian God, the expected value of both believing and not believing turns out to be infinite! (For discussion of this see my 'Pascal's Wager', 136ff.) In the present argument, the

In the remainder of this section, we shall consider two potential objections against this line of argument.[37] The first objection is that the argument above endorses an ignoble or even impious policy of pursuing a relationship with God solely out of a desire for self-interest or self-gain.

This objection rests on a mistake. A person who makes the decision to pursue the relationship of bonding (*devekut*) with God based on considerations of value need not be focusing solely on his own self-interest. Recall that the Jewish sources conceive of this relationship with God as both *subjectively* and *objectively* valuable. Thus, a person who pursues a good relationship with God may be trying to maximize his potential not only for attaining spiritual bliss or joy, but also for attaining a condition which he conceives to be *objectively* qualitatively superior to any other available state. Secondly, recall that the good relationship with God is not conceived as a solitary relationship with God, but rather as part and parcel of a communal project. In fact, the project of attaining a relationship of bonding (*devekut*) with God is conceived as part of a universal project of attaining a good relationship between all mankind and God. Thus, a person who decides to be a religious Jew on the basis of the argument above may very well have not only his own interest in mind, but also that of his community and the world at large.

A rather different objection is that, even if the argument above is technically sound, it seems odd or bizarre to make a decision about whether to be religious based on the application of a formula. Is this how people work, or should work, in real life? Do people, or should people, make religious decisions based on such calculations?

Underlying this objection is a broad issue about philosophy and its application to real life. Philosophers often construct complex arguments to defend some position which many ordinary persons would subscribe to, even if such persons never have and never will follow those complex arguments. Of course, most religious persons never have and never will *consciously* apply the Expected Value Principle to the case of religion. The argument above may be taken as a refined articulation of a process which may go on beneath the surface for some, if not many, religious persons. The nub of the argument is that it makes sense for someone to pursue what he conceives to be an uncertain but very great value, even at the risk of losing a certain but lesser value. The rest of the argument is a refined articulation of that basic insight. The fact that many ordinary persons are not likely to follow the argument is not a cogent objection to its validity.

---

value of the good relationship with God is conceived as qualitatively superior but *finite*. Thus, a course of action with a *higher* probability of attaining that relationship will have a *higher* expected value than a course of action with a *lower* probability of attaining that relationship.

[37] These objections have been leveled against Pascal's Wager. Pascal could have responded in much the same way I have done here. See 'Pascal's Wager', 123–124, 135–136.

(v) This paper has argued that it is rationally defensible for some persons to be traditional religious Jews. I concede that the argument given above is not compelling upon all rational beings. Moreover, nothing said in this paper rules out the possibility that a parallel argument might be constructed to show that some other religion is rationally defensible for some other persons.

The basic outline of such an argument could be quite similar to the one above. Many religions have some conception of God; some conception of what constitutes a good relationship with God; some conception of how to attain that relationship. Many religions conceive of that relationship as extremely or even supremely worthwhile. To show that any such religion is rationally defensible, one would begin by defending the rational coherence of these specific conceptions. Then, one would argue there is sufficient cognitive reason to believe there is (at least) a *live possibility* both that such a God exists, and that the particular way taught by that religion is the most plausible means of attaining that relationship. Finally, one would make the case that it is pragmatically rational to pursue that relationship in that religious way.

This paper has employed such a strategy to advocate the rational defensibility of being a traditional religious Jew. But, not everyone has the same conceptions of God, the good relationship with God, and the way of attaining that relationship. Furthermore, not everyone agrees on which of these conceptions is more or less likely to be true, based on the existing evidence. Suppose we define 'religious pluralism', as the view that different religions, which make (some) conflicting claims and involve (some) conflicting practices, can be rationally defensible for different persons. Until and unless it can be shown that some particular religion is rationally compelling upon all rational beings, it will not be surprising if, using the strategy set forth in this paper, different religions can be argued to be rationally defensible for different persons. If so, religious pluralism is a valid and sensible position. In this sense, religious pluralism is not the (absurd?) view that all religions – which make some mutually conflicting claims – are equally rational or valid *for everyone*. Rather, religious pluralism recognizes that, under present circumstances, rational persons may legitimately differ on which particular religion is rationally defensible *for them*.

This does not mean that it is rationally defensible for any person to adopt any religion at whim. It is quite possible that some persons are engaged in religious ways which are not rationally defensible *for them*, perhaps because of some incoherence in their conception of God or the good relationship with God. Alternatively, it is possible that given some person's conception of the good relationship with God, the particular way which that person employs to pursue that relationship could turn out to be, on analysis, not the most plausible way of getting to that particular goal. This paper comes not to end all theological polemics, but only to refocus them toward answering the

following question: is it rationally defensible to be a religious person, and, if so, which kind of religious person is it rationally defensible to be?[38]

[38] I would like to thank the following individuals for help on this paper: Martin P. Golding, Arie Michelsohn, Peter Vedder, and an anonymous referee for this journal.